EVALUATING EQUITY AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by Penny Jane Burke,
Annette Hayton, and Jacqueline Stevenson

Evaluating Equity and Widening Participation in Higher Education

Edited by Penny Jane Burke,
Annette Hayton and
Jacqueline Stevenson

Chapter 5

Student mothers in higher education: Tackling widening participation and child poverty

Claire Callender

Introduction

The Conservative government, like others since the late 1980s, has a stated desire to widen participation in higher education (HE). This has led to a burgeoning literature on widening HE access and participation, examining the experiences of 'non-traditional' undergraduate students and policies aimed at tackling their underrepresentation (Leathwood and Read, 2009; Archer *et al.*, 2003; Tett, 2000; OFFA and HEFCE, 2014). The category of 'non-traditional' student has changed over time but is often ill-defined. Largely missing from this literature and policy initiatives are those concentrating exclusively on students with dependent children, despite the fact that in England, about 7 per cent of all full-time undergraduates and 45 per cent of all part-time undergraduates are parents (Pollard *et al.*, 2013) (although not all are socio-economically disadvantaged). In the US, a third of low-income and first-generation undergraduates are parents (Nelson *et al.*, 2013).

Underpinning the case for wider participation is research on the relationship between HE participation, parental education and children's educational attainment. Studies in the United Kingdom and the United States and by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development demonstrate that parental characteristics, especially education levels and socio-economic status, are key determinants of HE participation (Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Blanden and Machin, 2004; Carneiro and Heckman, 2002). Other UK and international research shows that socio-economic gaps in children's attainment emerge very early, before they start school, and grow over time, and that a child's family background has a substantial influence on their educational development (Cunha and Heckman, 2007;

Feinstein, 2003; Demack *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, by the time these children reach university age they do not have the academic qualifications required for HE entry. This suggests that policies need to be targeted at improving poorer children's early educational attainment (Vignoles, 2013), which is assumed to lie outside the remit of HE (OFFA and HEFCE, 2014).

In parallel to widening participation initiatives aimed at school-aged children, a raft of policies aimed at reducing child poverty and the socio-economic gaps in children's attainment have emerged. The flagship UK policy is the Sure Start Children's Centres. Sure Start was part of the New Labour government's strategy to prevent social exclusion and to reduce child poverty. Its initial objective in 1999 was 'To work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to school' (Eisenstadt, 2011: 32). Its core services were designed to improve parenting skills and mothers' self-esteem. A later expansion brought the programme under local authorities' control, with a greater emphasis on helping mothers into work. By 2006, there were 2,500 Sure Start Children's Centres offering a wide range of services, covering the 30 per cent most deprived communities and including 70 per cent of children in poverty.

New Labour sought to tackle the 'social problems of disadvantage by inculcating [white] middle-class values at the level of the family' (Gillies, 2005: 838). Child-rearing moved from being a private concern to a public one, while good parenting was to compensate for social disadvantage:

> Upskilling parents, it was claimed, could reduce crime, antisocial behaviour and poverty whilst increasing the social mobility and life chances of poor children. Following this reasoning the state has a responsibility to regulate and enforce good parenting for the sake of the nation and its vulnerable children. (Gillies, 2014: 209)

New policies and guidelines on early intervention began to emerge, all emphasizing parenting skills.

From 2010, the core purpose of Sure Start Children's Centres changed, emphasizing targeted interventions 'to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in: child development and school readiness; parenting aspirations and parenting skills; and child and family health and life chances' (DfE, 2013: 7).

The 2010–15 Coalition government pitted parenting against poverty, and conceptually and ideologically sidelined poverty, severing it from its

root causes, while the complex relationship between parenting, poverty and outcomes for children elided. This special status attributed to parenting in overcoming material and social disadvantage is a new development and continued to guide the 2015 Conservative government's thinking and policies.

This chapter seeks to help fill some of the gaps in the limited existing research on parent students. More ambitiously, it attempts to link two, usually separate but interconnected, sets of policies: one on widening participation, the other on tackling child poverty and inequality.

Research and conceptual context

There is relatively little research concentrating on parent students in HE, and what exists is limited in scope (Brooks, 2012). Recent studies both in the UK and the United States analyse parents' experiences at individual, institutional and national levels (Lynch, 2008; Hinton-Smith, 2012; NUS, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Brooks, 2013).

According to this literature, the challenges to parents' participation and success in HE include lacking confidence and motivation; finding appropriate courses; finding affordable childcare; negotiating the complex system of financial support; juggling their studies around family and work responsibilities, with implications for course organization and attendance; and being unfamiliar with the educational culture and context, which has implications for retention, course design and pedagogic approach. Thus student parents often struggle within HE institutions, which take little note of their gendered and classed positions (Reay, 2003; Jackson, 2003), or of the demands of mothering. For example, the scheduling of classes ignores school hours, and there is a severe lack of crèche and other facilities (Moreau and Kerner, 2012). Such findings informed the design and delivery of the courses examined here.

However, this research has limitations. First, it focuses on parents in mainstream HE provision, usually on full-time undergraduate courses, rather than part-time undergraduate courses targeted at parents. Second, it is often more concerned about increasing HE participation rather than with widening participation (e.g. Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Brooks, 2013). While rightly promoting greater gender equality in HE, few studies focus exclusively on mothers from low socio-economic groups. Third, most research has stopped at the door of the HE institution, concentrating on what happens to parents while studying. Often missing is

an exploration of both the benefits and outcomes of study, and their impact on the domestic sphere.

When families and children are discussed, the research frequently, explicitly or implicitly, portrays them negatively as part of a wider 'narrative of disadvantage' (Woodfield, 2011: 410). Families are often depicted as a burden, a financial strain, generating guilt and constraining students' ability to study, engage in university life and develop a social life (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Brine and Waller, 2004).

Much has been written about the role, purpose and function of HE, although not specifically in relation to parents in HE. This chapter calls upon Watson's (2014) overview as a conceptual lens for analysing the outcomes of study for the course participants. The advantage of his approach for the present study is his focus on individual outcomes rather than institutions acting collectively as moral actors. Taking a historical perspective, Watson explores the moral, social and political underpinnings of the HE sector. He identifies ten claims about the 'purpose' of university for individuals: religious; personal development, such as self-realization; social, such as the way individuals improve their relationships with the wider world, culturally, economically and politically; technical know-how; professional acculturation; networking; maturation; protected time; love of the subject; mental gymnastics. These claims about what HE does for students encapsulate its potentially transformational nature. Put together, they also include claims about the role of HE 'in existential terms (how students come to be); in epistemological terms (how they think and appraise information); in behavioural terms (how they learn to conduct themselves); and in positional terms (both through competition and collaboration)' (Watson, 2014: 20). Above all, Watson questions whether the claims combine to create a moral compass – a form of personal responsibility, to take part in what Sen (2009) calls 'public reasoning'.

The study and methodological approach

The study described in this chapter, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, assessed part-time undergraduate courses targeted at low-income student parents delivered in Sure Start Children's Centres and run by two pre-1992 universities between 2007/08 and 2011/12. One university (henceforth called University 1) is based in London and focuses on part-time study, while the other (University 2) only provides courses via distance learning. The study explored the setting up of these courses and their organization, and the courses' perceived effects on the lives of the course participants, their families and their children, from the perspective of the course participants;

staff responsible for managing and teaching the courses; and the Sure Start Children's Centre staff. Here, we focus on the outcomes of studying for the participants and their children, exclusively from the mothers' perspective.

These universities' collaboration with the Children's Centres in areas of London with exceptionally low HE participation aimed to make HE learning available to parents who were unlikely to access more traditional routes offered by HE providers. The Children's Centres, by design, were in neighbourhoods with high-density social housing, making them easy to reach for the parents, avoiding the use of costly public transport. In addition, at the time of the study, all the Children's Centres had free on-site childcare facilities that course participants could use while attending their course or support sessions. Another significant advantage of these Children's Centres was that the learning environment was familiar and supportive, in contrast to the often alienating and isolating nature of many HE institutions (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Reay, et al., 2009).

When this study was undertaken and up to 2012/13, both courses studied were free. The vast majority of students were eligible for government tuition fee and course grants available to part-time undergraduate students and/or institutional bursaries. (In 2012/13 government tuition fee and course grants were abolished for new students and replaced with student loans, see Callender, 2013.) At University 1 students were taught face to face, with one three-hour session per week over the academic year. They were aiming for a Certificate of Higher Education, requiring 120 credit points and usually consisting of four modules, two of which they could take at the Children's Centre, and the remainder at the university's main campus. The courses were during school hours so students could fit them around other commitments. In contrast, University 2 students' Openings course required 15 credit points and was distance learning. All the learning materials were provided to the student in advance and they could study at their own pace. Students were given telephone support from a module tutor, and offered five study skills sessions and weekly peer- and tutor-supported face-to-face sessions at the Children's Centre.

Both courses aimed to prepare students for HE and further study. They were created for those with no or limited exposure to HE and its culture and conventions. The inclusive pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching adopted called upon the liberal, emancipatory theory of HE and ideas based on self-discovery that aimed to help learners achieve an independent point of view and a personal voice (Watson, 2014).

Both courses were explicitly designed to help overcome some of the impediments to accessing HE (Gorard *et al.*, 2006) faced by student

parents. In policy terms, they incorporated features promoted for widening participation and greater equality of opportunity by the government (OFFA and HEFCE, 2014), including outreach activities, cross-sector and intersector partnerships, and flexible and part-time provision.

The study included all the courses run by University 1 at nine London Children's Centres between 2007/08 and 2011/12, and University 2 courses between 2008/09 and 2011/12 at two Children's Centres, one in London and another in the north of England. The findings reported here are based on a survey of course participants conducted in autumn 2012 and follow-up, in-depth interviews in early 2013 with 30 female survey respondents, selected using a grid to ensure we interviewed a representative group. (The study also included in-depth interviews with staff at the Children's Centres and the universities' staff responsible for managing and teaching the courses.)

There were numerous advantages to this mixed methods approach and the multiple stages of data collection (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The survey allowed us to collect the same data from all participants, while the interviews provided opportunities to gain a more nuanced understanding and explanation of the survey results. The different data collection approaches helped validate the findings from a range of perspectives. In combination, this provided a better understanding of the outcomes of study for the participants than would have been possible from either research approach alone.

The intention was to survey all University 1's students enrolled in courses at Children's Centres since 2007/08 (N = 145), and all University 2's students who had studied via the two Children's Centres since 2008 (N = 103), a total of 248 people. However, inaccurate student contact details gave an effective survey population of 220. Of these 220, 115 responded to the survey, an overall response rate of 52 per cent. Students completed the questionnaire online or over the telephone.

The characteristics of the survey respondents (table 5.1) show that the majority were women (90 per cent), aged over 30 (59 per cent), lone parents (56 per cent), who had left school under the age of 18 (58 per cent), and started their course with low-level entry qualifications (67 per cent). Most respondents were not employed before starting their course (73 per cent) and were living in low-income households – living just above the poverty line (65 per cent) (in 2011/12, median household income was £23,200 (ONS, 2013); 60 per cent of the median household income is the most common measure of poverty). Most did not have another family member who had studied for a HE qualification (53 per cent). Just under

half came from an ethnic minority (49 per cent) and had a child under the age of 5 when they started the course (47 per cent).

Table 5.1: Characteristics of course participants by institution attended

Characteristic	University 1 %	University 2 %	All %
Gender			
Female	96	92	90
Male	4	8	5
Age at start of course			
30 and under	38	50	41
Over 30	62	50	59
Ethnicity			
White	33	61	37
Non-White	66	39	49
Family type			
Lone-parent family	49	69	56
Two-parent family	51	31	34
Age of youngest child when started course			
Under 5	48	44	47
5 and over	52	56	53
Economic status when started course			
In paid employment	32	17	27
Not in paid employment	68	83	73
Gross annual household income			
Under £14,999	59	82	65
£15,000 and over	41	18	35
Age left full-time education			
Under 18	55	63	58
18 and over	45	37	42
Highest qualification on entry			
Level 2 or below	56	86	67
Level 3 or above	34	11	33
Family member studied for HE qualification			
Yes	45	53	47
No	55	47	53
Number of respondents	**79**	**36**	**115**

Source: Survey of course participants, 2012.

Although respondents' characteristics were broadly similar, University 1 students were significantly more likely than their University 2 peers to come from an ethnic minority, to be living with a partner or spouse, and to have started their course with a Level 3 or higher qualification. All these socio-economic characteristics are typically associated with 'widening participation' and 'non-traditional' students. It is clear, therefore, that these courses, in line with their mission, attracted students who were financially, socially and educationally disadvantaged, especially when compared with the part-time undergraduate population nationally (Oxford Economics, 2014).

Course participants' views on the effects of their learning

To assess course participants' perceptions of the impact of their courses on their family and children, survey respondents were asked whether their views about their children's education had changed as a direct result of their course. Over four out of five believed that as a result of their course, they had higher educational aspirations for their children; a half that their children were more interested in learning; and nearly a half that their relationship with their children had improved (figure 5.1). These outcomes exceeded respondents' initial motivations for studying as under two in five claimed to have started their course to be a 'role model' for their children, and under a quarter to help their children with their education.
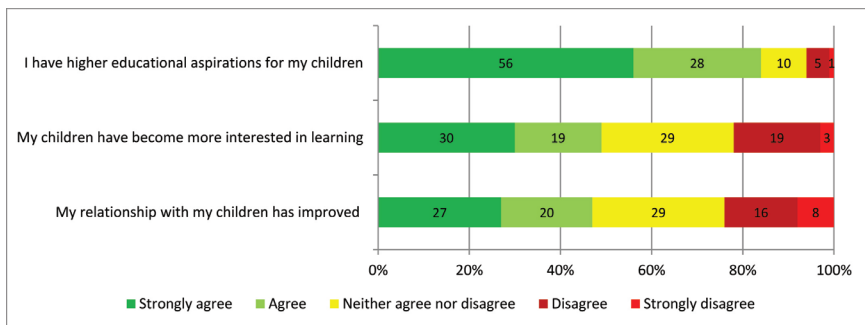
Figure 5.1: Course participants' views on outcomes of the courses for their children (all survey respondents, N=115)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012.

These outcomes broadly support the overall mission underpinning Children's Centres, in terms of raising the parents' aspirations. However, the interviews revealed that the mothers strongly associated their reported changed attitudes with other learning benefits. The survey gives some indication of how many course participants thought they had profited from these wider benefits of learning (figure 5.2). The high proportion of

respondents realizing they could get a higher education qualification is noteworthy, fulfilling the courses' overall aim – to increase confidence in participants' capability to take a degree. Important too were the private, non-market benefits (McMahon, 2009; Brennan *et al.*, 2013), especially intangible assets such as improved self-confidence, attitudes to learning, and optimism, which Jamieson et al. classify as identity capital (2009: 10). Enhanced generic skills (human capital) were also significant for mothers in this study, especially in their engagement with their children's learning. Even so, in the interviews, the mothers repeatedly referred to their improved self-confidence, a finding echoed in other studies, especially of adult learners (Dolan *et al.*, 2012; Callender *et al.*, 2010). Taking a broader view, these findings resonate with Watson's (2014) claims about the purpose of HE, especially in terms of personal development, and the elaboration of 'character' as formed through 'liberal' HE.
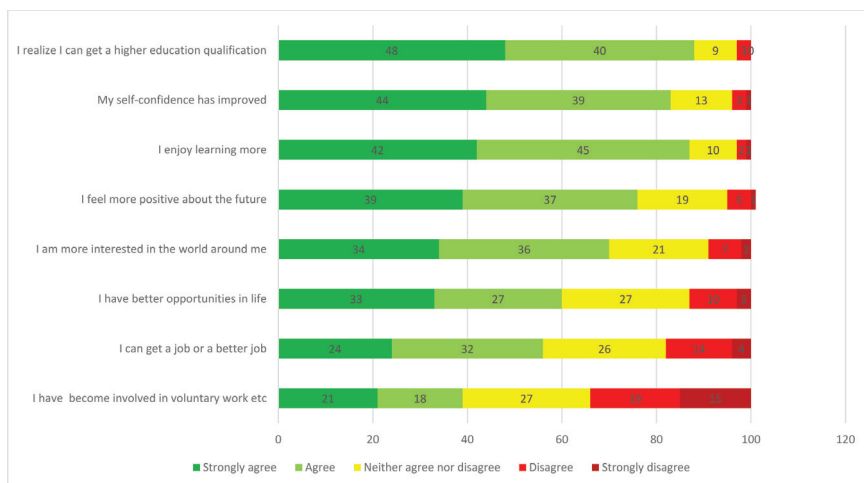

Figure 5.2: Course participants' views on some of the wider benefits of learning (all survey respondents, N=115)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012.

Another linked recurrent theme in the women's narrative was the transformational nature of their HE learning experiences, in the sense used by Mezirow and Associates (2000) of irreversibly changing the way they understand the world. This transformation could be characterized as a more critical understanding of the world, through the academic study of social sciences, and endorsement of foundational values of HE such as respect for diverse opinions and ways of debating them. These changes were far broader in scope and reach than the narrow focus on parenting skills that preoccupies the work of Children's Centres and other

government-sponsored parenting interventions. Indeed, the majority (70 per cent) of course participants surveyed claimed that as a direct result of their course they were more interested in the world around them (figure 5.2).

The mothers' interviews showed that central to this was the way the courses changed how they saw their worlds, their children and themselves, including, for some, an understanding of their classed and gendered position. Sarmeen (all names are pseudonyms) is a 35-year-old married woman with three sons aged under 10, and her experiences are indicative of such changes, including a greater political awareness:

> It's opened my mind up a *lot* … It does change you. I mean, before I was in this other little world, taking my children to school, coming home, doing the housework and I really didn't know that much about the world out there. I'm not aware of everything that's going on around me or the decisions that are being made in political life and things like that, I didn't really take note of what's going on but really, when you hear things and there's things that you've looked at on your course and you think, 'Oh, okay, so I understand what they mean.' … so when there's things on the news, when there's things in the papers, it sort of makes me take note and think … 'Oh, hold on, this is what's going on around me, this is what the government are doing – how do I feel about it?' … It *has* enlightened me and it *has* made me want to, almost want to learn a lot more.

Kaylee, 34 years old, disabled, married with a 9-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son, like other mothers, claimed her course had changed her life in terms of personal development and social and political engagement:

> Best decision of my life, next to having my two children! [Laughter] … Really. It's changed my life immensely. … the things I'm interested in these days, be it on TV or in the media, be it the people I follow on Twitter, it's all changed. I don't follow Victoria Beckham, I'm following Owen Jones! ... The news, you know, before I didn't care but now I'm always watching *Question Time* and I don't miss what's going on. … Even the *books* I read these days. ... It's understanding things, the social world. It's like before I didn't see the point of volunteering but now I do that, I started two years ago, but I didn't see the point of demonstration and marches and all this, or petitioning for something, I didn't understand the point of it.

Amna, 23 years old, separated from her husband with three sons aged 9, 5 and 3, talked about how her learning experiences changed her, including her relationship with her husband:

> I definitely feel so much more liberated! Yes, I do feel a lot more free within myself and a lot more … I don't know how to put it, but you know when you just feel intelligent? [Laughter] … as I got more and more educated I felt more liberated and for that reason I'd talk more and ask more questions and was more curious, and some people don't like changes, some people don't like challenges, and I didn't know that my husband was one of those people.

Moreover, her liberating experience altered her ambitions for her children and what she wanted for them:

> I would like them [children] to go on and do further education and maybe get degrees and stuff, but I don't think it is necessary. … It's their choice completely, something that I didn't get, I had no choices and I don't want that for my children. They can do whatever they want … I just want them to be good human beings. … now, since I've got my education all I want for them is to feel as liberated as I do.

These claims echo Watson's notion of the social purpose of HE in the way that individuals improve their relationship with a 'wider world: culturally, economically, politically' (Watson, 2014: 19). It can also be a form of education for citizenship in its broadest sense of obligations to civil society, the state and wider international interests. Here Watson is concerned about 'soft citizenship' and:

> not just self-awareness, but also awareness of others, and of deeper senses of sympathy and connection than civic conformity will ever bring about. In so far as institutions succeed in stimulating and nurturing it, they contribute to the more individual sense of personal responsibility and capacity for 'public reasoning'. (Watson, 2014: 59)

Course participants' views on their involvement in their children's learning

This small-scale study cannot claim a statistically robust causal link between the course participants' learning and changes in their behaviour

and that of their children. However, our findings do feed into other large-scale longitudinal quantitative research that shows the strong relationship between poverty, parenting and intergenerational effects. They contribute to a qualitative understanding of some of the dynamics underpinning such studies. And they illustrate how exposing poor mothers to HE, not just parenting skills, might affect their ability to engage in their children's education in ways that potentially can enhance their children's educational trajectories.

Goodman and Gregg (2010), drawing on the Millennium Cohort Study, found that the socio-economic gap in attainment widens as children enter and move through the schooling system, especially during primary school years. Other research questions some of these findings and whether parents' involvement in home learning, parental warmth, and discipline explain the significant variance in teacher-rated attainment outcomes (Hartas, 2015).

Carter-Wall and Whitfield conclude it is 'not possible to establish a clear causal relationship between AAB [attitudes, aspirations, and behaviour] and children's educational outcomes' (2012: 1). Positive parent–child relationships may be a consequence rather than a cause of high-performing children (Dermott, 2012: 5). However, the review by Gorard *et al.* (2012) of over 1,000 studies on the impact of attitudes, aspirations, and behaviour on children's attainment and participation confirmed a causal link between parental involvement in their children's education, school readiness and subsequent attainment. Parenting and home environment are important contributors to income-related gaps in cognitive development (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010), and parenting consistently emerges as the single most important factor in gaps in school readiness. However, poverty matters too. Underpinning the achievement gaps at school entry is both parenting and poverty.

Thus there is promising evidence that interventions to improve parental involvement in their children's education, especially their early education, could be effective in improving children's attainment. The research evidence (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012) suggests this would demand improving at-home parenting; involving parents in school; engaging parents in their children's learning and in their own learning; and aligning school–home expectations.

Improving at-home parenting

Many mothers in the interviews talked about how they believed their learning experiences had improved their ability to parent their children.

Particularly significant was that the women's courses frequently covered child development and psychology, which the mothers claimed increased their knowledge and understanding of their children and how they parented them.

Kaylee recounted how what she learned about children through her studies led her to consciously break with what she described as the traditional cultural practice of using physical punishment for children. Reading about the ineffectiveness of punishment had made her observe other parents who did use physical punishment, and that their children were no better behaved, so she decided to test what she learned in practice. Her husband also became part of her experiment and would call her at work for parenting advice. She reflected that her course had given her new parenting strategies:

> Yes, because I think if it was before I did this course, I would have been, 'I've told you THREE times!!!' but then I realize that when I think about it, try another technique. If you've told someone twice and they cannot learn that way, then maybe try another way.

Other mothers talked about how the way they thought they communicated with their children had changed; Callie, 24 years old, married with two sons aged 5 and 1, and a 2-year-old daughter:

> I learned a lot about children, looking after children. … Before, I don't think about it. I just think, 'I have to ask the child to do this. You have to do it.' But now I've realized that while you are telling the child to do it, you have to explain to the child the reason you want him to do it … so that he will understand and he won't say, 'Mummy hates me.' He will see that mummy loves, him, they attach. I really learned a lot.

Makayla, aged 34, lone parent with a 5-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son similarly felt she was better able to cope with her children.

> Before, I didn't know how to handle my daughter. … The way we were learning it is to apply it to our daily lives, so if you apply it, and reflect to your daily life, then I have learnt a lot, it's changed a lot. I approach things differently and I look at things differently. … I've learnt that I can calm down and approach it in a calm and different way, so I don't scream anymore.

None of these mothers had been taught parenting skills *per se* on their courses, but their broader academic HE studies had given them invaluable insights into parenting. It was this wider context and deeper understanding that were essential to the transformational nature of their learning. The courses called on their experiences, and applied ideas within sociology and psychology to the women's lives, starting from their existing knowledge and endorsing the centrality given to critically reflective learning that helped students to situate their feelings about, and experiences of, learning in a broader context.

Involving parents in school

There were numerous women who during or after their course became more involved in their children's school, especially as volunteer teaching assistants or as members of the Sure Start Children Centre's parents' board. For instance, for Shanara, a 31-year-old married woman with a daughter aged 10 and a son aged 4, her course increased her confidence, allowing her to get involved in her son's school:

> I wasn't involved in my daughter's school activities but this [course] boosted my confidence to be with the other parents and the teachers. … I've been volunteering [at son's school], but last year my son was not in full-time education so I couldn't be there for a long time so I used to go for two hours a day, but now I am going for full time actually, doing volunteering.

As a result of Shanara's course, she felt she understood her children better and this helped her in the school voluntary work and in dealing with children there. It aided her knowledge about 'how children learn to read and how to blend sounds and I can understand how much they can understand and then I need to stop'. Shanara hopes to get a paid teaching assistant post.

Amna also enthused how her course had changed her life, and prompted an interest in education and involvement in her children's schooling. Following her course, she had started a BA in Education and Special Educational Needs at a local further education college.

> There's no words I have to describe how it's made so much difference to the children's lives … how much happiness it gives me as well, to be able to know what my children are doing at school, and understanding it and then question it if something isn't right. … I was not good at Maths at all but I went out and bought ... this Maths dictionary, it's called the *Oxford Maths*

> *Dictionary for Children*, and it's brilliant and it teaches me! But before, I wouldn't have had the confidence to see what I need to buy for my children, what would help them, and I'm doing Education [at further education college] so I know what's happening with the current curricula and what they're expecting from children and also I know how to find things out now.

Engaging parents in their children's learning and in their own learning

Around two out of five survey respondents continued studying after they had finished their modules at the Children's Centre, while over three-quarters reported that they intended to take another course within the next three years.

The vast majority of survey respondents also claimed that as a direct result of their courses, their skills had improved 'a lot' (figure 5.3). These skills and approaches to learning had been integrated into their courses. Most were wide-ranging generic skills that parents could apply to their lives beyond their studies. The mothers' interviews confirmed that these skills, alongside their learning and improved self-confidence, made them feel better equipped to support their children in school tasks. This ability and willingness were probably aided by the finding that the vast majority of survey respondents realized they could get a HE qualification (88 per cent) and enjoyed learning more (87 per cent) (figure 5.2). They felt they had the competences, capacity, and confidence to assist their children.
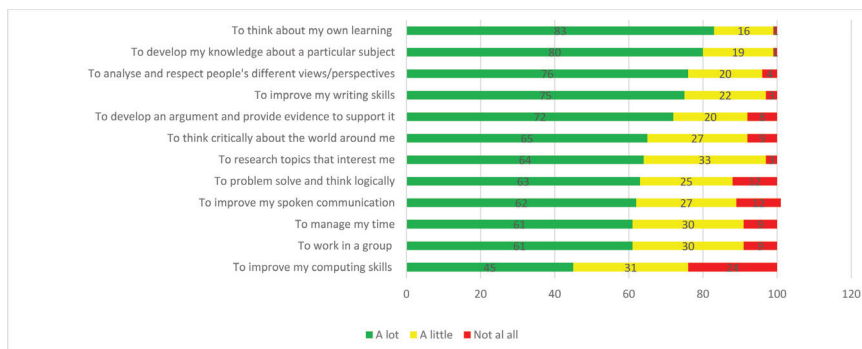
Figure 5.3: Course participants' views on learning outcomes (all survey respondents, N=115)

Source: Survey of course participants, 2012.

The mothers' interviews revealed how their engagement with their younger children's learning often took the form of reading to them and teaching

them how to read, while with older children it often involved helping with homework. More generally, mothers reported an increased confidence in their ability to search for information and to write academically, enabling them to assist with many different aspects of their children's schoolwork, often enriching the experience.

Lesia, aged 24, lone parent to a 4-year-old son, believed that without the skills learnt on her course, she most probably would have avoided helping her son with his reading.

> So getting on to the course and having to do assignments and essays and stuff, having him now in Reception where he comes home with a book every day, it helps me because I could actually deal with him. If I didn't get on to that course, maybe I would say, 'Oh, later, mum will do it later.' And later never comes. … So it's helped us quite a lot.

For Sarmeen and other mothers such as Grace, it was the combination of technical competence in knowing how to study, seeking out information, research topics, and reflecting upon them, along with their new-found confidence and improved writing skills, that allowed them to engage in their children's learning. Some felt more empowered as mothers.

> I've used the skills that I've been taught on how to study, how to look up different sources of information, 'Oh, you don't just need to go on the internet, let's go to the library', 'Why don't we go on a trip and look at this?'. So those sort of areas really. And also like reading newspapers like the *Guardian* and taking a bit more … [Laughter] … you know, you can't get away with the *Daily Mail*! (Sarmeen)

> It impacted my children's lives as well because now I can, I help them with their work … Now I look and support him [son], give him advice and guidance around each of these assignments, things like that. With my younger son we sit and do the homework together, I support him … It's amazing! That's the greatest thing for me, that I can support my children with their education now. (Grace, aged 46, lone parent with two sons aged 17 and 9)

There were also examples of mothers with teenage children where the engagement was a two-way process – the mothers engaged with their teenagers' studies and the teenagers engaged with their mothers'. An example is Alvita, a 36-year-old lone parent with a 10-year-old son and

two daughters aged 12 and 16. Her eldest daughter is studying Health and Social Care.

> One of the things that she does quite a lot, with studying Health and Social Care, is all these psychological things that she learns, she said, 'Oh, do you know this yet?' so she kept on coming to me before and saying, 'Oh, this and this', so now I am going as well to her and saying, 'Oh, did you know this?' and then she says, 'Yes, and …', we could exchange our ideas.

Once again, it was the academic nature of the women's courses that gave them the skills to help their children. Such educational skills went well beyond those associated with 'parenting'. Taking a broader perspective, these findings resonate with Watson's (2014) technical know-how purpose of HE and its role in imbuing competences and capabilities.

Aligning school–home expectations

Amna's experiences illustrate the potential for the alignment of home and school experiences, primarily because of the degree in Education she was taking as a result of her earlier course:

> Even at nursery, the amount of things I could have done with Rayan, I didn't do because I just didn't know, I was just so ignorant, but with Mikhail, he's at nursery now and I know … the language programmes they do at schools, the groups they have, the phonics, everything that's going on, so I know exactly how to interact with my children, how to talk to them, and they won't be confused because that's how they are being taught at school; I think it makes a difference.

For other mothers, the alignment between school and home expectations arose more because they acted as a role model for their children. However, the notion of role models is problematic. Their absence is often used to explain, for instance, underachievement in boys, despite the lack of evidence and the misplaced assumptions upon which such a discourse is based (Moreau, 2011).

Yet the women interviewed for this study believed that setting a good example for their children was influential in their children's academic attainment. For instance, Janet, a 39-year-old widow with a 12-year-old girl and 7-year-old boy, was convinced: 'My children are doing fantastic at school, because they see me studying, they now are doing their homework and are studying harder and their grades have gone up at school as well.'

Some used their studies as a way to discipline their children to ensure they went to school, such as Ruth, aged 34, a single parent with a 4-year-old son:

> This morning my little boy said he didn't want to go to school and I said, 'Well you've got to because mummy's got to go to school today.' And it's nice for him to know that I'm learning and studying and it encourages him to want to go. He knows mummy's got to do it.

Other parents exhorted their children to work hard at school, using themselves as a warning of the consequences of failure to study when young, and the difficulties of returning to study as an adult and a parent. This could be deployed alongside the parent as a present role model. Some parents, such as Evelyn, aged 48, married with three sons aged 6, 12 and over 18, presented themselves as a cautionary tale: 'it gives you more *push* to help them and so let them realize that they can accomplish things, they don't have to wait until they get older.'

Conclusions and implications for widening participation policies: Two for the price of one

Policies targeted at widening HE participation largely have been divorced from those aimed at reducing child poverty and inequality such as Sure Start Children's Centres. This study, and the courses run in Children's Centres, brings together these policies and the thinking underpinning them. In a sense, the courses acted as a bridge between these two interconnected, but often separate, policy domains.

This study was based on the experiences of low-income parents taking part in initiatives conceived and designed to challenge the educational, social, and economic inequalities such disadvantaged parents frequently encounter. It explored the perceived benefits of study within the domestic sphere, moving away from a narrative of disadvantage. Specifically, it examined mothers' views on the impact of the courses on their lives, and especially on their children's educational trajectories.

The mothers reported that as a result of their course, they had become more involved in their children's education. They claimed their parenting skills had improved; they had become more active in their children's nursery and school; they were more engaged in their children's learning and their own learning; and there was a greater alignment between school and home expectations. All these recounted changes are, according

to extant literature, likely to influence children's school readiness and subsequent attainment.

These outcomes were inextricably linked to the HE nature of the parents' courses, and especially their transformational and liberating character, and the broader ideas about the role and purpose of HE, as proposed by Watson (2014). The mothers maintained that the courses altered the way they saw the world, how they thought and appraised information, and how they behaved in general and in relation to their children. They insisted the courses enabled and encouraged their involvement in, and engagement with, their children's learning. Such outcomes are not new, nor are they unique to these courses, but they remind us of the power of HE's potential to transform. They reflect Watson's claim 'that HE's purposes come together in terms of self-creating and the authentic life, the habit of thinking deeply, and the capacity to connect with others empathetically' (2014: 107).

These transformations were facilitated by a pedagogical approach reflecting an emancipatory theory of HE. This stance and these courses' broader conceptualization were not based on an individualistic deficit model – where the victim is blamed for their poverty, for not participating in HE, for being a 'bad' parent, for lacking certain skills, values, and aspirations – an ideology underpinning many widening participation initiatives (Burke, 2012) and those aimed at tackling child poverty through improved parenting skills (Dermott, 2012). They went well beyond a focus on narrowly defined parenting skills, characteristic of policy initiatives aimed at tackling child poverty, underscoring Hartas's argument that:

> Educational inequalities cannot (and should not) be approached as the product of values and attitudes that parents hold but as outcomes of structure, exacerbated by different access to resources and possibilities for social advancement, and the gradual diminishing of the welfare state. (2015: 33)

The HE courses in this study recognized that 'widening access to and participation in HE is primarily a project of social justice, which must attend in detail to complex issues of inequality, exclusion and mis-recognition' (Burke, 2012: 117). On a small scale, they attempted to address structural inequalities. They provided low-income mothers with educational opportunities and the prospect of social advancement. The provision, tailored to parents' needs, was of at least equal potential value for future generations of children from low-income families as widening participation projects aimed at raising the aspirations of high-achieving

primary and secondary schoolchildren. The courses, according to the mothers, changed their lives, and in doing so, their involvement in their children's education, which potentially could contribute to improvements in their children's educational attainment – two possible achievements for the price of one. This raises issues about the purpose of HE. It brings into question the widely asserted assumption that universities have a limited role to play in tackling socio-economic gaps in children's underachievement.

Note

This chapters draws on a research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

References

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (eds) (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Blanden, J. and Gregg, P. (2004) 'Family income and educational attainment: A review of approaches and evidence for Britain'. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 20 (2), 245–63.

Blanden, J. and Machin, S. (2004) 'Educational inequality and the expansion of UK higher education'. *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 51 (2), 230–49.

Brennan, J., Niccolo, D. and Tanguy, S. (2013) *Things We Know and Don't Know about the Wider Benefits of Higher Education: A review of the recent literature* (BIS Research Paper 133). London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Brine, J. and Waller, R. (2004) 'Working-class women on an Access course: Risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities'. *Gender and Education*, 16 (1), 97–113.

Brooks, R. (2012) 'Student-parents and higher education: A cross-national comparison'. *Journal of Education Policy,* 27 (3), 423–39.

Brooks, R. (2013) 'Negotiating time and space for study: Student-parents and familial relationships'. *Sociology*, 47 (3), 443–59.

Burke, P.J. (2012) *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond widening participation.* London: Routledge.

Callender, C. (2013) 'Part-time undergraduate student funding and financial support'. In Callender, C. and Scott, P. (eds) *Browne and Beyond: Modernizing English higher education*. London: Institute of Education Press, 130–58.

Callender, C., Hopkin, R. and Wilkinson D. (2010) *Futuretrack: Part-time students: Career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students*. Manchester: Higher Education Careers Services Unit.

Carneiro, P. and Heckman, J.J. (2002) 'The evidence on credit constraints in post-secondary schooling'. *Economic Journal*, 112 (482), 705–34.

Carter-Wall, C. and Whitfield, G. (2012) *The Role of Aspirations, Attitudes and Behaviour in Closing the Educational Attainment Gap*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Online. www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-achievement-poverty-summary.pdf (accessed 23 July 2013).

Cunha, F. and Heckman, J. (2007) 'The technology of skill formation'. *American Economic Review*, 97 (2), 31–47.

Demack, S., Drew, D. and Grimsley, M. (2000) 'Minding the gap: Ethnic, gender and social class differences in attainment at 16, 1988–95'. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 3 (2), 117–43.

Dermott, E. (2012) '"Poverty" versus "parenting": An emergent dichotomy'. *Studies in the Maternal*, 4 (2), 1–13. Online. www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.37/galley/34/download/ (accessed 10 December 2017).

DfE (Department for Education) (2013) *Sure Start Children's Centres Statutory Guidance: For local authorities, commissioners of local health services and Jobcentre Plus*. London: Department for Education. Online. www.gov.uk/government/publications/sure-start-childrens-centres (accessed 5 December 2013).

Dolan, P., Fujiwara, D. and Metcalfe, R. (2012) *Review and Update of Research into the Wider Benefits of Adult Learning* (BIS Research Paper 90). London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Eisenstadt, N. (2011) *Providing a Sure Start: How government discovered early childhood*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Feinstein, L. (2003) 'Inequality in the early cognitive development of British children in the 1970 cohort'. *Economica*, 70 (277), 73–97.

Gillies, V. (2005) 'Raising the "meritocracy": Parenting and the individualization of social class'. *Sociology*, 39 (5), 835–53.

Gillies, V. (2014) 'Troubling families: Parenting and the politics of early intervention'. In Wagg, S. and Pilcher, J. (eds) *Thatcher's Grandchildren? Politics and childhood in the twenty-first century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 204–24.

Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (eds) (2010) *Poorer Children's Educational Attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Gorard, S., See, B.H. and Davies, P. (2012) *The Impact of Attitudes and Aspirations on Educational Attainment and Participation*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N. and Slack, K. (2006) *Review of Widening Participation Research: Addressing the barriers to participation in higher education: A report to HEFCE by the University of York, Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Hartas, D. (2015) 'Parenting for social mobility? Home learning, parental warmth, class and educational outcomes'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 30 (1), 21–38.

Hinton-Smith, T. (2012) *Lone Parents' Experiences as Higher Education Students: Learning to juggle*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Jackson, S. (2003) 'Lifelong earning: Working-class women and lifelong learning'. *Gender and Education*, 15 (4), 365–76.

Jamieson, A., Sabates, R., Woodley, A. and Feinstein, L. (2009) 'The benefits of higher education study for part-time students'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (3), 245–62.

Johnson, R.B. and Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2004) 'Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come'. *Educational Researcher*, 33 (7), 14–26.

Leathwood, C. and Read, B. (2009) *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A feminized future?* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Lynch, K.D. (2008) 'Gender roles and the American academe: A case study of graduate student mothers'. *Gender and Education*, 20 (6), 585–605.

Marandet, E. and Wainwright, E. (2009) 'Discourses of integration and exclusion: Equal opportunities for university students with dependent children?'. *Space and Polity*, 13 (2), 109–25.

McMahon, W.W. (2009) *Higher Learning, Greater Good: The private and social benefits of higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mezirow, J. and Associates (2000) *Learning as Transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Moreau, M.-P. (2011) 'The societal construction of "boys' underachievement" in educational policies: A cross-national comparison'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26 (2), 161–80.

Moreau, M.-P. and Kerner, C. (2012) *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis*. London: Nuffield Foundation.

Nelson, B., Froehner, M. and Gault, B. (2013) *College Students with Children Are Common and Face Many Challenges in Completing Higher Education* (IWPR Briefing Paper). Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

NUS (National Union of Students) (2009) *Meet the Parents: The experience of students with children in further and higher education*. London: National Union of Students.

OFFA (Office for Fair Access) and HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) (2014) *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

ONS (Office for National Statistics) (2013) 'Median household income in the UK, 1977–2011/12.' Online. www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/household-income/middle-income-households/1977---2011-12/sty-middle-income-households.html.

Oxford Economics (2014) *Macroeconomic Influences on the Demand for Part-Time Higher Education in the UK*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England. Online. www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2014/ptdemand/ (accessed 6 June 2014).

Pollard, E., Hunt, W., Hillage, J., Drever, E., Chanfreau, J., Coutinho, S. and Poole, E. (2013) *Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2011/12* (BIS Research Paper 115). London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Reay, D. (2003) 'A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education'. *Gender and Education*, 15 (3), 301–17.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009) '"Strangers in paradise"? Working-class students in elite universities'. *Sociology*, 43 (6), 1103–21.

Sen, A. (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tett, L. (2000) '"I'm working class and proud of it": Gendered experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education'. *Gender and Education*, 12 (2), 183–94.

Vignoles, A. (2013) 'Widening participation and social mobility'. In Callender, C. and Scott, P. (eds) *Browne and Beyond: Modernizing English higher education*. London: Institute of Education Press, 112–29.

Waldfogel, J. and Washbrook, E. (2010) *Low Income and Early Cognitive Development in the UK*. London: Sutton Trust.

Watson, D. (2014) *The Question of Conscience: Higher education and personal responsibility*. London: Institute of Education Press.

Woodfield, R. (2011) 'Age and first destination employment from UK universities: Are mature students disadvantaged?'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36 (4), 409–25.